

# THE MISSION AND STRATEGIC PRIORITIES OF THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



BY JAMES H. BILLINGTON  
THE LIBRARIAN OF CONGRESS

## MISSION

The Library's mission is to make its resources available and useful to the Congress and the American people and to sustain and preserve a universal collection of knowledge and creativity for future generations.

## PRIORITIES

I. THE FIRST PRIORITY of the Library of Congress is to make knowledge and creativity available to the United States Congress.

The Congress is the lawmaking body of the United States. As the repository of a universal collection of human knowledge and the creative work of the American people, the Library has the primary mission to make this material available and useful to the lawmakers who are the elected representatives of the American people.

II. THE SECOND PRIORITY of the Library of Congress is to *preserve, secure and sustain* for the present and future use of the Congress and the nation

A. a comprehensive record of American history and creativity;

The record of American history and creativity has to be maintained in order to fulfill the mandates both to protect intellectual property rights (the statutory role of the Copyright Office) and to pre-

serve the record of the past for the sake of present and future creativity (the constitutional mandate "to promote the Progress of Science and useful Arts").

B. a universal collection of human knowledge.\*

A universal collection is essential to meet the present and potential future needs of the Congress (the statutory work of the Congressional Research Service) and of the government more broadly (Law Library, Federal Research Division, general reference services).

All other services and activities of the Library of Congress depend on its core mission of maintaining and continuing to stock the world's greatest storehouse of human knowledge and of American memory.

---

\*except for technical agriculture and clinical medicine, which are covered by the National Agricultural Library and the National Library of Medicine respectively.

The collections must continue to be no less broad and inclusive than at present because

- far more knowledge is being generated in more ways, more places and more formats than in the past
- the knowledge needs of Congress and government are becoming more complex and extensive than ever before as we enter the information age in a competitive international environment where Americans will increasingly have to rely on better use of knowledge to succeed; and
- the access needs of Congress, the U.S. government and the thinking and creative public cannot be made hostage to the collection and deaccession policies and priorities of other less comprehensive and less nationally accountable institutions.

**III.** THE THIRD PRIORITY of the Library of Congress is to make its collections maximally *accessible* to (in order of priority)

- A. the Congress
- B. the U. S. government more broadly
- C. the thinking and creative public.

The Congress' creation of the Jefferson Building a century ago has enabled the Library in the 20th century to become as fully open in fact as it had always been in theory to the broader federal government and to the general public. It is unprecedented in human history—and a unique American accomplishment—to offer open public access to an institution that is at the same time in many respects the working library of a government and a *de facto* national library. The unifying purpose of providing all the variegated library services of cataloging, reading rooms, and reference staff is to afford as much access to useful knowledge as possible to each of these three constituencies.

The National Digital Library effort will provide remote electronic access to the most interesting and important documents of American history and culture for local schools, libraries and homes across America.

The unique and ambitious mandate that the Congress has given its library during the past two centuries is a stunningly original expression of a broader American democratic ideal. For a democracy to be dynamic and self-correcting, its *governing institutions must be* not only continuously accountable to the people but also *solidly based on a body of knowledge that is both constantly expanding and equally available to those who legislate and those who elect the legislators.*

Equal access to knowledge for both governors and governed, rich and poor, represents an essential minimal form of empowerment in a pluralistic democracy—and has found expression in our system of public libraries and public schools. The Library has been given by the Congress a series of centralized national functions to perform that are essential to the health of these local institutions: setting bibliographic standards, providing subsidized cataloging, storing the records and artifacts of the copyrighted creativity of America, and creating and delivering nationwide reading materials for the blind and physically handicapped.

Congress has now recognized that, in an age where knowledge is increasingly communicated and stored in electronic form, the Library should provide remote access electronically to key materials. For the general public, the Congress has endorsed the creation of a National Digital Library through a private-public partnership that will create high-quality content in electronic form and thereby provide remote access to the most interesting and educationally valuable core of the Library's Americana collections. Schools, libraries, and homes will have access to new and important material in their own localities along with the same freedom readers have always had within public reading rooms to interpret, rearrange, and use the material for their own individual needs.

IV. THE FOURTH PRIORITY is to add interpretive and educational value to the basic resources of the Library in order to enhance the quality of the creative work and intellectual activity derived from these resources, and to highlight the importance of the Library to the nation's well-being and future progress.

Implicit in the broad and international inclusiveness of the Library's clientele (both here and electronically elsewhere) is another ideal unique to American democracy: the desire to promote the free exchange of ideas no less than of material goods with the outside world.

There are three essential aspects to this mission of quality enhancement that are needed by America and uniquely possible within the Library of Congress

- A. *greater use by the Congress, government officials, scholars, scientists, and the private sector* of the vast special and foreign collections that are unique to the Library and that are underused resources for specialized needs.
- B. *greater use of the Library's Capitol Hill facilities by scholars and creative people at all levels* for the kind of interdisciplinary,

cross-cultural, multimedia, multilingual, and synthetic writing that is important to Congressional deliberation and national policy-making, but inadequately encouraged both in specialized academia and in advocacy-oriented think tanks.

- C. *greater use by the general public* through programs that stimulate interest, increase knowledge, and encourage more citizens to use the collections on-site and electronically.

The Library staff must move more of its efforts from inward-looking and process-driven activities to outward-looking service activities focused on knowledge navigation: *helping more people find appropriate materials in a swelling sea of unsorted information* and doing things with library resources that the Library of Congress can uniquely do. This requires not merely more development and retraining of staff than the Library has previously been able to do, but also facilitating in new ways more extensive and *systematic use by researchers of the distinctive materials that only the Library of Congress has*. Programs for the general public, such as exhibits or publications, must demonstrate the value of the collections and promote pride and participation in the Library.

## THE ENABLING INFRASTRUCTURE

To accomplish its mission the Library must have an efficient and effective infrastructure with four key components:

- A. The *motivation and mobilization of human resources* in all parts and at all levels of the Library.

There are four important elements within this category:

- 1. recruiting, assessing, holding accountable and, where merited, recognizing the achievements of the work force on the basis of objective evaluations of skills and performance.

- 2. training, developing and, where needed, retooling the work force to perform new functions in new ways.
- 3. promoting fairness, equal opportunity, and respect for diversity at all levels and in all parts of the Library.
- 4. fostering communication and consultation to promote innovation and increase participation in decision-making and the implementation of change.

- B. The provision and *delivery of electronic services* in order to serve the departments of the Library in the execution of the Library's overall priority missions with speed, quality, and economy.
- C. The allocation and *use of space and equipment* in order to
  - 1. preserve and make accessible the artifactual collections and
  - 2. maximize the efficiency, productivity and well-being of the staff.
- D. The operation of modern financial and information systems to facilitate decision-making and ensure accountability.

## IMPLICATIONS

All of these priorities and the enabling infrastructure are essential and must receive some level of support if the Library is to be able to raise the money to survive, but they are outlined in order of absolute importance so that, if further cuts have to be made, they can be administered in accordance with these priorities.

A constant effort must be made to reduce or eliminate activities that perpetuate procedure rather than extend service; process must give

way to substance. We must rely on less paper and more "walk-around," and devote less attention to past practices and turf protection as we continually reexamine what we should be doing both inside and outside the organization. The objective for the next year or more should be to eliminate functions and activities that may have been desirable in the past but do not support core priorities or do not support them well enough to justify their costs.

October 16, 1995

